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The Stagnation, fall and rise of Singapore's Political Opposition, 1996-2013

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon personal interviews, I present the opinions of leading Singaporean opposition politicians and activists about developments and issues in Singapore politics covering the period 1996-2013, which I characterise as a period of stagnation, fall and rise for the opposition. The purpose of the article is to explore and understand the history of Singapore's opposition, as experienced and told by participants in the drama. I attended opposition social functions in order to understand more about the movement and to gain access to study participants whom I then interviewed, mostly on a one-on-one basis. The sampling method used can best be described as snowball sampling, working in conjunction with convenience sampling. My aim was to interview people of a mix of genders, ages, party affiliations, and politician-versus-activist status. Most of the interviews with my 24 interviewees were conducted over the period March 2010 to October 2011. My interview results show that the Singapore opposition activist community, while small outside of election campaigns during this era (probably numbering no more than fifty), was passionate and committed to taking the city-state away from what its members perceived to be the authoritarian pathway set up by the ruling regime. The Workers' Party's (WP) rapid rise from obscurity to become Singapore's second-strongest political force over the 2006-13 period surprised many commentators. The WP's ability to secure high vote percentages and even win seats based on brand factor alone (or primarily) was an important new development.

KEYWORDS: Grassroots Activism, Internet Activism, Singapore Opposition Parties; Singapore Political History, Singapore Politics

Introduction

Drawing upon personal interviews, I present the opinions of leading Singaporean opposition politicians and activists about developments and issues in Singapore politics covering the period 1996-2013, which I characterise as a period of stagnation, fall and rise for the opposition. The two highest profile opposition parties then had contrasting approaches. The Workers' Party of Singapore (WP) was a disciplined and restrained political machine which had a primary goal of winning more seats at elections whereas the Singapore Democratic Party

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(SDP) operated more like a western or Hong Kong-based NGO with its emphasis upon human rights, freedom of speech, democracy, and strategic civil disobedience. One reason for starting the era covered at 1996 is so that I could include the March 2010 ruminations of the unsuccessful National Solidarity Party (NSP) candidate Dr. Wong Wee Namⁱ about his experiences contesting the January 1997 General Election in Hong Kah GRC.ⁱⁱ Although this General Election's polling date was January 2, 1997 the heated election campaign actually took place in December 1996. I situate at least some of the discussion within the context of the Chinese-educated working-class left-wing that was strong in Singapore in the immediate post-war years until it was defeated by the conservative-technocrat wing of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) under the prime-ministership of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew in the 1960s (Visscher, 2007, pp. 105, 112, 142-3, 152-6).ⁱⁱⁱ I also study the growth of opposition forces on the left and centre-left in Singapore over the 1996-2013 period and the relative performances of the various parties at the 1997, 2001, 2006, and 2011 General Elections (hereafter GEs) with a particular focus on the 1997, 2006, and 2011GEs.

The era 1996-2013 featured the first appearance and rise of the "Facebook generation", a largely pro-opposition group of young people who took politics in Singapore into the internet age and provided younger Singaporeans, who might have felt alienated from the PAP, a lively forum where they could forge bonds, express frustrations, and communicate ideas. The rise of the internet activists seemed to take the PAP and its supporters by surprise.

In the five years leading up to the 2011GE, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) was, by far, the most committed party in encouraging active use of the internet by activists on a daily basis outside of election campaigns (Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), 2010). This party had a dedicated group of young volunteers in their twenties who were very active, for several years, in making political posts on the SDP website, blogs, and Facebook. The group was given a room with three or four computers at the SDP's then headquarters at Jalan Gelenggang, off Upper Thomson Road in Singapore's northern suburbs, where they could spend as much or as little time as they wanted making political posts and engaging in political discussions online. As well as being free to come and go as they pleased, they were not required to formally become party members because the party then wanted young people to avoid the fear of the stigmatisation or marginalisation which opposition party members have sometimes experienced (or perceived to have experienced) in the past. These people had a range of views and interests with some being closely aligned to the SDP and others being non-aligned but broadly mutually sympathetic at least in relation to single issues (such as the feminist anti-death penalty campaigner Rachel Zeng and the press-freedom supporters Dr. James Gomez and documentary-maker Martyn See).^{iv} Over time, some or even most of these activists moved further away from the SDP, either through a dramatic once-and-for-all exit (in the cases of youth issues-oriented politician Jarrod Luo and underground artist and punk musician Seelan Palay) or through a natural drift (in the cases of See and Zeng). (Note that Seelan Palay served short prison terms for political activities in 2010-11.)

It was widely believed in 2010-11 that the SDP Youth (as they were collectively known) had the ability to help the SDP overcome the "tainted brand" factor associated with the party's Secretary-General Dr. Chee Soon Juan following his much-publicised public confrontation with the then PM Mr. Goh Chok Tong at a Jurong West market during the 2001GE election campaign (source: Roderick Chia, personal interview, March 4, 2010). In a socially

conservative Asian society, Dr. Chee's forthright and direct manner towards Mr. Goh was perceived as not showing sufficient respect to the PM who was a relatively experienced campaigner then aged in his early-sixties. This perception, encouraged by the government-controlled mainstream media, was shared by a large percentage of opposition supporters, as well as PAP supporters and swinging voters. Those who criticised Chee were of the more conservative persuasion who believed that the manner in which one approaches an opponent (it must be with respect and decorum) is at least as important a matter as the opposing views held by the two individuals. After 2013, Dr. Chee had a surprise renaissance (but failed to win a seat), during a period when the original SDP Youth had dispersed.

Background

Most of the interviews conducted for this research project were conducted between September 22, 2009 and May 6, 2011. As at the dates of these interviews, the combined opposition held two seats in parliament, Potong Pasir SMC held by Mr. Chiam See Tong of the Singapore People's Party (SPP) and Hougang SMC held by Mr. Low Thia Khiang of the WP.^v The ruling-party had 21 seats (14 out of 14 GRCs and seven out of nine SMCs) and 82 MPs at this time. The opposition had not been able to win a GRC since the introduction of the GRC system in 1988. Chiam contested for SPP in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC at the 2011GE while his wife, Madam Lina Low, contested in Potong Pasir SMC. The 2011GE campaign also saw Mr. Low shift ground to Aljunied GRC where his five-person team was the first opposition team in Singapore's political history to win a GRC (Kor & Ong, 2011).

The moves by Chiam and Low reflected the collective opposition's mounting frustrations at failing to secure a GRC in the first 23 years of the GRC system plus a growing optimism that, in both cases, a designated successor might be able to hold on to the relatively safe seats of Potong Pasir (5.82% margin of safety; opposition vote 55.82% in 2006) and Hougang (12.7% margin of safety; opposition vote 62.7% in 2006) which would allow Chiam and Low to put their best candidates together in a committed effort to win one GRC apiece. Of course it was hoped and even expected that, on winning a GRC each, both parties could hold on to their respective "safe" seats.

In the end, the WP was successful in winning Aljunied GRC (Kor & Ong, 2011) and holding on to Hougang SMC (Kor & Chong, 2011; Erbilgin, 2018), whereas the SPP failed on both counts. This reflected the first real emergence of the WP brand as a significant second-force in Singapore politics; serious concerns about Chiam's advancing age (he was 76-years-old as at the election date); and some dissatisfaction that his politically inexperienced wife was the designated successor in Potong Pasir (which smelled of nepotism to some liberal-democratic opposition supporters). Low's designated successor, Mr. Yaw Shin Leong, recaptured Hougang SMC for WP, with a 2.06 percentage-point swing (Kor & Chong, 2011).

The young and enthusiastic Yaw (34-years-old as at the election date) had impressed people on the ground in Hougang SMC due to his ability and willingness to speak Teochew with the residents and his Mandarin-language political book *Towards Political Vibrancy & Development* (迈向政治发展与繁荣) which he had published in December 2010 (Yaw, 2010). His not inconsiderable personal charm had also allowed him to make inroads into an area with

a high percentage of ethnic Chinese and dialect-speaking voters. Given Hougang's Teochew population, it was absolutely to his advantage that Yaw was a Teochew clansman of the Nanyang *Pho Leng Hui Kuan* and a member of the Singapore Teochew *Poit Ip Huay Kuan*. The fact that his father died when he was 13 and his single mother struggled to support him and his younger sister through tertiary-education created an impression that Yaw had the credentials and working-class ethics expected by a party called the Workers' Party with its historic links to the old Chinese-educated left-wing of the 1960s.

By contrast, Potong Pasir SMC was returned to the PAP at the 2011GE by a mere 114 votes (7,878 for SPP versus 7,992 for PAP) (Au Yong & Durai, 2011; Hussain, 2011; Singapore Elections, n.d.-a). (Voting results for the 2011GE were taken from *The Sunday Times (Singapore)*, May 8, 2011 (noon edition), pp. H9-H12.) The loss in Potong Pasir SMC saw a decline in valid votes cast for SPP equal to 2.51 percentage-points. At the 2011GE, WP scored 46.58% of valid votes in contested constituencies (swing towards WP a very impressive 8.15 percentage-points). The WP brand had arrived; whereas new fault-lines were appearing within SPP and party supporters were mourning the loss of an electorate which had been held by Mr. Chiam since 1984 and which had started to have its own identity (like Hougang) as an opposition stronghold, with opposition values, within PAP Singapore. The collective opposition celebrated the victory in Aljunied GRC but mourned the loss of Potong Pasir. The WP's strategy had been proven wise; by focusing its efforts on the eastern part of the island, it now held both Aljunied and Hougang which share a common boundary.

Hougang SMC was subjected to a by-election on May 26, 2012 after Yaw was fired by the WP on February 14, 2012 for failing to clarify allegations relating to his alleged personal indiscretions (Singapore Elections, n.d.-b). This by-election saw WP's Mr. Png Eng Huat (ex-East Coast GRC team) win the seat (swing towards PAP 2.72 percentage-points). At a January 26, 2013 by-election, WP's Ms. Lee Li Lian comfortably won Punggol East SMC thus proving the new strength of the WP brand-name at least in the eastern part of the island (swing towards WP 13.49 percentage-points). Arguably this 2013 by-election created a situation in Singapore where most seats appeared to be a fifty-fifty chance of going either way. However, such a theory had not then been tested at a general election. As it turned out, from the vantage-point of August 2017, the strength of support for WP peaked with this 2013 by-election, and it has been downhill since then (for various reasons which are not within this article's scope because they are not within the time period covered by this article).^{vi}

Research Method

The purpose of the article is to explore and understand the history of Singapore's opposition (1996-2013), as experienced and told by participants in the drama. I first took an active interest in Singapore politics during a stint spent working as a foreigner in Singapore from January 1993 to January 1994. This interest was then rekindled during my December 1996 holiday visit to Singapore when the election campaign for the January 1997GE was in full swing; and the confrontation between the WP and PAP in Cheng San GRC was being played out in the press. During 2009, whilst working as a senior lecturer in Australia, I began to take an interest in the SDP's website and the party agreed when I put in a request to them for an interview for a planned new research project. I then went to Singapore and met SDP

Assistant Secretary-General John L. Tan, and three SDP activists (Jaslyn Go, Seelan Palay, and Jarrod Luo), on September 22, 2009.

During my second research trip to Singapore, I attended the SDP's 30th Anniversary Dinner held on February 27, 2010. The aims of my attendance at this function were to understand more about the party and the movement and to gain access to study participants whom I then interviewed, mostly on a one-on-one basis. The sampling method used can best be described as snowball sampling, working in conjunction with convenience sampling. My aim was to interview people of a mix of genders, ages, party affiliations, and politician-versus-activist status; and I believe that this aim was largely achieved (see list of interviewees in Table 1). I was able to interview the Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General of the SDP (Dr. Chee Soon Juan and John L. Tan); the then Secretary-General of the NSP (Goh Meng Seng); and the then Treasurer of the WP (Eric Tan) among others.

Snowball sampling is generally used when it is difficult to find members of the chosen population (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). For example, individuals who claim unemployment benefits but are actually in employment. Therefore: (a) contact has to be made with one or two cases in the population; (b) ask these cases to find more cases; (c) ask these new cases to find more new cases (and so on); and (d) stop if no new cases are put forward or if the sample is large, yet manageable. With this technique, the issue of bias looms large as respondents are likely to find other possible respondents who are like themselves, leading to a homogeneous sample (R. M. Lee, 1993). However, for a population that is difficult to find, snowball sampling may be the only or best choice (Saunders et al., 2009).

Most of the interviews with my 24 interviewees were conducted over the period March 1, 2010 to October 31, 2011 (please refer to Table 1).

The first interview for the project was with John L. Tan of the SDP on September 22, 2009 while the last interview was with Jarrod Luo on May 19, 2017. The 24 interviewees included 21 males (87.5%) and 3 females (12.5%). My oldest interviewee was the late Patrick Lee Song Juan (aged 64 at the date of our first interview and 66 at the date of our third and final interview); the youngest were Renarda Yoch (aged 14) and Sebastian Yap Puay Tong (aged 17). The shortest interview was 1 hour and 10 minutes with Yaw Shin Leong (WP) on October 5, 2011 while the longest interview was 3 hours and 0 minutes with the activist Singa Crew aka Jason Crew on October 4, 2011. The median (average) interview length was 120 minutes (112.5 minutes) although it should be noted that the researcher, unfortunately, did not record interview lengths for some interviews (see Table 1). Politician-versus-activist status is a one-and-for-all classification: if the person has ever contested a general election or by-election that person was classified as a politician (even if the person first contested an election after our interview date). An activist is defined as a non-politician, so every participant was placed in one and only one of these two categories. Of the 24 interviewees there were 15 (62.5%) politicians and 9 (37.5%) activists.

The number of 24 interviewees suggests that views from a wide range of diverse individuals were canvassed. It was not possible to do more interviews due to time and cost constraints with the researcher then being Australia-based. My teaching commitments in Australia allowed for week-long trips to Singapore only twice per calendar year. With snowball sampling being used, trips shorter than one week are of little use and, in fact, even one-week is very short. Anywhere from two to eight weeks would be preferred. For example, Arkan

(2018, p. 5), in his study of the development of nomadic education in Nigeria, writes that: “Six days were spent to obtain in-depth information from the participants.” It is unfortunate that all my interviews did not occur within the gap between general elections. Care should be taken in reading the interview transcripts (available on my political blog) as some interviews occurred after the May 2011 GE when circumstances on the ground had already altered. Ortiz (2018) was able to conduct 30 semi-structured interviews with prison gang members which is a remarkable achievement given the ethical and access issues associated with such a population. I conclude that this study’s 24 and Ortiz’s 30 interviews are roughly comparable. Also note that this study had 29 interviews with 24 interviewees as three individuals were interviewed more than once (please refer to Table 1).

Table 1

List of interviewees, Singapore research project

	Interviewee	G	Age	Party	Politician v Activist	Interview date(s)	Intervi ew time	Location
1	John L. Tan ^a	M	47	SDP	Politician	09-22-2009 02-20-2011		Singapore
2	Jaslyn Go	F	37	SDP	Politician	09-22-2009		Singapore
3	Seelan Palay	M	25	SDP	Activist	09-22-2009		Singapore
4	Jarrood Luo	M	25	SDP	Politician	09-22-2009 04-07-2012 05-19-2017	1:30 (2nd)	Singapore
5	Wong Wee Nam	M	62	NSP	Politician	03-01-2010	1:15	Singapore
6	S.K. Leong	M	62	SDP	Activist	03-02-2010	1:15	Singapore
7	Eric Tan	M	54	WP	Politician	03-03-2010	2:00	Singapore
8	Roderick Chia	M	35	WP	Activist	03-04-2010		Singapore
9	Yap Puay Tong	M	17	SDP	Activist	03-04-2010	2:00	Singapore
10	Renarda Yoch	M	14	SDP	Activist	03-04-2010	2:00	Singapore
11	Patrick S.J. Lee	M	64	SDA	Politician	10-12-2010 10-06-2011 03-28-2012	2:00 (2nd); 2:30 (3rd)	Singapore
12	Chee Soon Juan	M	47	SDP	Politician	10-14-2010		Singapore
13	Goh Meng Seng	M	40	NSP	Politician	10-15-2010	2:00	Singapore
14	James Gomez	M	45	WP	Politician	01-10-2011	1:50	Australia
15	Chee Siok Chin	F	45	SDP	Politician	02-20-2011		Singapore
16	Wong U-Wen	M	25	SDP	Activist	02-20-2011		Singapore
17	Singa Crew	M	28	None	Activist	10-04-2011	3:00	Singapore
18	Yaw Shin Leong	M	34	WP	Politician	10-05-2011	1:10	Singapore
19	Yee Jenn Jong	M	46	WP	Politician	10-06-2011		Singapore
20	Desmond Lim	M	43	SDA	Politician	10-06-2011		Singapore
21	Ravi Philemon	M	43	SPP	Politician	03-29-2012		Singapore

22	Rachel Zeng	F	27	None	Activist	04-29-2013		Singapore
23	Jam Cruisers	M	28	None	Activist	06-21-2013		Singapore
24	Gilbert Goh	M	54	NSP	Politician	07-07-2016	2:00	Singapore

^aAges are as the date of first interview. Ages are estimated in some cases.

The following research questions were posed to all of the study's interviewees:

1. Explain the events in your life that caused you to become an opposition supporter.
2. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition party you are most closely involved with?
3. What do you think will happen to Singapore politics in next 10-15 years and how many seats will the opposition win at next election?
4. What do you think of SDP Youth and internet political activism?
5. What do the opposition parties need to do to go from 25% to 50.1% and what type of people make up that next 25% that the opposition must win over?

After several interviews were conducted, I decided that Q4 should be changed from “what do you think of SDP Youth?” to “what do you think of your party's youth?” The reasons were because to ask about SDP Youth was considered a little too direct and intrusive in the conservative Singapore context; and because people with no involvement with SDP found it difficult to comment about SDP Youth because they did not know much about them.

The data sources for the present study are: literature search; participant-observation; and semi-structured interviews (with 24 people in person, three of those interviewed twice or more times, and six interview responses sent and returned by e-mail). Participant-observation includes the author's attendance and networking at SDP's 30th Anniversary Dinner held on February 27, 2010 and its 31st Anniversary Dinner held on February 19, 2011 (see also the study by Addai-Mununkum (2018) where the researcher uses participation-observation, along with interviews and focus groups, in his study of religious identification among Ghanaian school-teachers). The author also attended the election night count and press conference with SDP politicians and supporters held at the Quality Hotel (Balestier Road) on May 7, 2011.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012, p. 673) define “internal validity” as the “[e]xtent to which findings can be attributed to interventions rather than any flaws in your research design.” I hope and expect that this study has achieved internal validity; I have read widely and followed Singapore politics since around 1992 and was careful to read as widely as possible and discuss events with as many people as possible, over the 2010-11 period when most data was collected, so as to make sure that I was well-versed in contextual factors. This is one key way to increase the likelihood of internal validity being achieved. All facts offered by interviewees were checked against reliable secondary sources. I attempted to interview people of a mix of ages, genders, party affiliations, and politician-versus-activist status to minimise the chance of bias affecting the results and to look at issues from diverse angles. Of course, given the nature of snowball sampling, the study's findings might have been slightly different had different people been interviewed or had the interview order been changed. One weakness is that no PAP politician or supporter was interviewed.

Saunders et al. (2012, p. 671) define “external validity” as the “extent to which the research results from a particular study are generalisable to all relevant contexts.” I believe that external validity has been largely achieved and that results are generalisable to countries of similar levels of economic development, and similar cultural backgrounds, but readers must remember that my results apply primarily to the 1996-2013 time-period. There are lessons for other ex-British colonies, e.g. Fiji, which are at a prior stage of economic development and which might be trying to learn from PAP strategies and policies; as well as opposition and neutral people in those countries who want to learn how to build an effective and sustained opposition movement. Lessons can be learned from the various Singapore opposition parties and, of course, from their setbacks as well as their achievements.

“Reliability” is defined by Saunders et al. (2012, p. 680) as the “extent to which data collection technique or techniques will yield consistent findings, similar observations would be made or conclusions reached by other researchers or there is transparency in how sense was made from the raw data.” We can see that this is a two-part test. I believe that, firstly, other researchers studying at that time period would have received broadly similar findings as I interviewed leaders or senior people in the three main opposition parties, WP, S|DP, and NSP. A different researcher might have got some variations in findings if different people had been interviewed or even had the same people been interviewed at different times and/or in a different order. Different research questions would have got somewhat different answers and a researcher with different interests and a different personality might have moved the interviews in different directions or put more or less emphasis on, for example, the social versus the economic, or election results versus details of specific opposition policies. Some researchers might have interviewed only politicians, as Dr. James Gomez suggested to the researcher would have been a better option, although I am not convinced on this point as I was interested in receiving diverse views. In terms of transparency, I have provided details of interviewees and interview dates and lengths in Table 1; and I tried to select quotes fairly and not take words or even sentences out of their context. Most of the interviews are published in full on my political blog (Google “interview with Dr. Wong Wee Nam 2010” for example) so readers can read the complete content.

Polonsky and Waller (2011, p. 76) state that: “you must identify any potential harm to participants and seek to ensure that the potential is minimized within the study.” During the research process the researcher adhered to all of the ethical requirements of his University. Interview participants were informed in advance of the purpose of the research; they selected the times and places of the interviews; and they were informed that they could withdraw from the project at any time. They were also given the option to respond anonymously although only three people took up this option. No interviews were tape-recorded; instead the researcher took notes by hand. If I was advised that a response or comment was “off-the-record” I would stop writing in my notebook; and this was clearly visible to the interviewee. One interviewee (Jarrod Luo) requested that the interview transcripts for two out of our three interviews not be published on my political blog and this request was adhered to.

One interview is worthy of special mention here. As mentioned above, the oldest interviewee was the late Patrick Lee (aged 64-66) and the youngest were Renarda Yoch (aged 14) and Sebastian Yap Puay Tong (aged 17). The latter two were interviewed together by the researcher late one afternoon in a crowded suburban McDonald’s Restaurant (in Bedok Town

Centre). Renarda Yoch told the researcher that he had his parents' permission to attend the interview and I was aware that he had previously attended political functions by himself, such as SDP's 30th Anniversary function. With the benefit of hindsight, I can say that interviewing minors creates extra ethical issues and that it might have been better had another adult also been present (in addition to 17-year-old Sebastian). However, it was very valuable to obtain the perspectives of teenaged opposition activists.

This article was recast in February 2018 as a history article because of the fact that the interview data was getting out-of-date (from the viewpoint of describing and reflecting on contemporary events) and the researcher was no longer actively researching the topic or keeping abreast of new developments.

Findings

1997 General Election (based primarily on Dr. Wong interview, March 1, 2010)

In late-1996, Dr. Wong Wee Nam represented an important new "type" of opposition candidate because he was a highly educated professional person in charge of his own professional practice. This "type" rose to prominence at the 1997GE and has only increased in prominence since then. This type emerged locally as a result of PAP representatives and certain sections of the public traditionally making negative remarks about the (lack of) "quality" of opposition candidates in the lead-up to elections. Two particular opposition individuals were labelled by the PAP at various times past as the "slipper man" and the "bicycle thief", respectively, while in 1996 there was the "Chinese chauvinist" (the WP's Mr. Tang Liang Hong) and, since the 1992 Marine Parade GRC by-election, Dr. Chee of the SDP. Dr. Chee has been labelled as both a dishonest thief and mentally disturbed by Singapore's first PM the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015) (hereafter LKY). This PAP argument about lack of "quality" has dovetailed well with the party's key ideology of meritocracy (Barr, 2009; Barr & Skrbis, 2008) whereby unless the ruling-elite maintains total power then Singapore could fall back into racial and religious riots and the economic situation of its neighbouring countries within Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Dr. Wong's business card, humbly and in small type, states that he holds an MBBS from the former University of Singapore and an LLB (Hons) from University of London. Rodan (1996) has written that Singapore's main opposition parties have fallen victim to the elitist ideology of PAP in terms of their large and hierarchical Central Executive Committees and their choice of "professional" and "graduate" candidates. Rodan (1996) is correct, to a certain extent, as this does show the completeness of PAP hegemony over all aspects of Singapore society over the past fifty years. However, it should also be remembered that the opposition parties must adapt themselves to the reality of the situation in which they find themselves in if they are to make inroads at the polls. As Karl Marx wrote:

Men [*sic*] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past (Marx, 1994, p. 188).

Dr. Wong (aged 49 at the 1997GE election date) asked himself the rhetorical question as to why he should not enter politics given PAP's perpetual concerns about the lack of quality opposition candidates. Having established himself as a successful medical practitioner, and with much less to lose than people in government employ or dependent on the government for business, Dr. Wong decided to stand for NSP in Hong Kah GRC at the 1997 GE. In my interviewee Dr. Wong's words:

I found the government getting more and more authoritarian as the years go by. So I said [to myself] 'I criticise the opposition for not producing good candidates so I ask myself why do I criticise the opposition when I'm not standing for election?' So as to try to improve the situation I decided I must do something. So I joined the NSP. We did not expect much; it's not a dinner-party. ... People in our positions, such as myself [*sic*], will not want to go for election contests. We all think what is the point? The system benefits you [the elite], why put your head on the chopping-block? Being arrested is always hanging over your head and being sued for defamation. We chose Hong Kah, suddenly a group of us was quite credible – [there was] one other doctor, one businessman. ... It surprised everyone.

Dr. Wong mentioned to the researcher how, when the NSP team campaigned on the ground, the reaction was positive. The government-controlled mainstream media even showed an interest because, as Dr. Wong said, the team was a strong one made up of professional candidates. Supporting the above quote from Dr. Wong, da Cunha (1997, p. 21) writes that: "[i]ncluded in the NSP slate were two medical practitioners, Patrick Kee and Wong Wee Nam, both of whom added credibility to the NSP ticket." Mr. Steve Chia, then aged 26 and later a Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) for being the best-polling losing opposition candidate at the 2001GE, was also a member of the 1997 Hong Kah GRC NSP team. Chia (2006) also commented on the strength of this Hong Kah GRC team which included two medical practitioners in private practice and one CEO. The NSP team members were taken out to lunch by mainstream journalists who promised them fair coverage. However, once the campaign proper began, the conviviality was dispensed with and Hong Kah's NSP team received minimal mainstream media (hereafter MSM) attention.

In the 1997GE campaign (held during December 1996), certain PAP ministers began to focus their attentions upon Cheng San GRC where Mr. Tang Liang Hong was receiving vocal support from the Chinese-educated members of that constituency at WP rallies (Visscher, 2007, p. 298). He was standing on the same team ticket as the veteran opposition politician Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam (hereafter JBJ). Perhaps nervous about Tang's popularity with the Chinese-educated electorate, Tang was soon targeted by the PAP which relentlessly criticised him in the MSM for being an allegedly divisive "Chinese chauvinist" (Visscher, 2007, p. 298). As the late opposition politician Patrick Lee Song Juan said to the researcher, only the PAP is allowed to play the "race-card" (personal interview, October 12, 2010). "Chinese chauvinist" is a very damning term in the context of Singapore politics (Visscher, 2007, p. 298) as it implies that the guilty party does not subscribe to the dominant PAP ideological tenets of meritocracy and equality before the law but instead lobbies to improve the lot of her/his own ethnic group in a partisan manner. It can also be viewed as a form of code-speak designed to rally PAP supporters and scare those tempted to flirt with the opposition parties. The PAP's harsh treatment of Tang in 1996-97 won it few favours from the majority of the electorate which, although conservative socially and politically, tends also to rally around the underdog and

certainly holds its own view of applied ethics from which it will not be swayed. (See Seow (2006) and da Cunha (1997) for more information about what came to be known in Singapore political circles as the “Tang Liang Hong affair”.) The then PM Goh Chok Tong took a personal interest in Cheng San GRC during the 1997GE campaign (Visscher, 2007, p. 298) as he was later to do with respect to the opposition held Potong Pasir and Hougang SMCs after he had become Senior Minister (SM) (as another of this study’s interviewee, Dr. S.K. Leong, mentioned). The attention being given by opposition supporters, PAP politicians, and the public alike to Cheng San GRC diverted local attention away from Hong Kah GRC in December 1996. However, the possibility remained that the overall favorable public reaction to the Cheng San WP team would have a positive spill-over effect that would benefit the NSP’s Hong Kah team.

Two days prior to the polling day, PM Goh announced that precincts (smaller areas within constituencies) which had a majority of voters voting for PAP candidate(s) would receive priority upgrading for their Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats. Since 85-90% of Singaporeans then lived in government housing, the upgrading promise was a powerful incentive for many swinging voters to swing back to the PAP on polling day. Dr. Wong recounted that, when his Hong Kah GRC team heard of this announcement, they knew that their election chances had disappeared. Steve Chia (NCMP) was particularly strong in his parliamentary attacks on the issue of PAP using government funds in order to shore up its own electoral support in marginal constituencies (Chia, 2006). This was the first time that the PAP had said that it would identify areas *as small as precincts* so that only pro-PAP precincts would get flat upgrading or would get flat upgrading first.

The NSP team’s losing result in Hong Kah GRC, where it polled 31.00% of the valid votes (da Cunha, 1997, p. 132), was not unexpected. However, it arguably reflected neither the general mood on the ground nor the affection that the ground held for the members of the respective teams. Da Cunha (1997) offers unequivocal praise to Dr. Wong as follows: “Then there was the nimble-minded Dr Wong Wee Nam of the National Solidarity Party, who impressed with his expansive delivery and linguistic versatility, switching back and forth from English to Mandarin every few minutes.”

The vote of 31.00% in Hong Kah GRC, when viewed in the context of Singapore’s post-independence but pre-2011GE political history, should be seen as a reasonable result that reflects well upon the NSP team. The NSP’s 1997 campaign generated a much superior result than did the SDP’s 2001 effort in the same constituency when it polled only 20.26% of the valid votes (Singapore Elections, n.d.-a). The GRC went uncontested in GE2006 and so it was automatically retained by the PAP. The Elections Department announced on February 24, 2011 that Hong Kah GRC would disappear for the 2011GE, so the (contested) political history of Hong Kah GRC ends with the 1997GE participated in by Dr. Wong. Dr. Wong reflected further on the “votes-for-upgrading” issue and the NSP team’s 1997 performance in Hong Kah as follows (personal interview, March 1, 2010):

We lost a lot of votes definitely due to the upgrading promise. ... We thought we might get a good result. ... Two days before voting the government announced the counting of votes was [to be] by precinct, not by whole constituency. We [opposition voters] are easily identifiable. ... It suddenly shocked the voters. It forced them to reconsider. It did swing the votes for the PAP. ... The PAP party was jubilant because they defeated us. All of them got some official positions.

We are OK [about the result], the NSP leadership. Just before this precinct issue we were happily optimistic. After this we said ‘there is no point, we are not going to win anymore’. We more or less expected the result; we were not in any way disappointed.

Sitting with the researcher thirteen years later (March 1, 2010), in the working-class inner-suburban Tiong Bahru Food Court on a quiet sunny Monday afternoon, Dr. Wong came across as a veteran political campaigner, someone who did his best to take on “the system” with a clear conscience and lost the battle. To the researcher’s eyes, Dr. Wong also came across as somewhat saddened and battle-scarred by the events of 1996-97. He was asked by his personal friend Mr. Eric Tan, the then WP Treasurer, to contest the 2011GE on a WP ticket, but he refused the offer. SDP activist Ms. Jaslyn Go has said of Dr. Wong:

To me, my sense is that Dr Wong sees himself playing the role of mentoring young ones. He is still pretty much active behind the scenes ... rendering help when call[ed] for ... and he always like[s] to see the young ones getting interested in politics. ... Wwn [Wong Wee Nam] is very good. He is a very neutral person ... [t]hus his views are highly sought” (personal e-mail communications with author, May 22 and June 2, 2010).

Dr. Wong revealed to the researcher that he hoped that the combined opposition could win *eight seats* at the 2011GE, i.e. one GRC and three SMCs (including the two SMCs already held). This prediction fell short by two SMCs.

2006 General Election (based primarily on Dr. S.K. Leong interview, March 2, 2010)

The second interviewee presented in this article, Dr. S.K. Leong, like many of his generation then aged in their sixties, was initially a PAP supporter but, sometime during the 1970s, became disillusioned with certain specific ruling-party policies.

Dr. Leong’s questioning attitude with respect to specific government policies led him on a personal quest that ended with him becoming an opposition supporter and an occasional participant in SDP demonstrations. Dr. Leong’s main objections to PAP policies were in relation to the financial squeeze being placed on the working-class by the government and by the government’s increasing involvement in many spheres of business. He objected to the tendering process for the tendering out of stalls at government-owned hawker centres (food-courts) and to the government’s control of most residential and industrial properties in the country. Dr. Leong also was personally offended by the ideology of eugenics behind the controversial “Graduate Mother Scheme” which was launched in April 1984 (Lydgate, 2003, p. 125; Singh, 1992, pp. 16, 94-5). Under this scheme, a dating agency, the Social Development Unit (SDU), was set up for graduates only and graduate mothers were given priority allocations of their children to preferred primary schools. Non-graduate mothers were offered grants of S\$10,000 if they agreed to sterilisation after the birth of their first two children (Lydgate, 2003, p. 125). Lydgate (2003, p. 125) terms this policy “almost Darwinian” and certainly it reflected the eugenic beliefs of the then PM LKY. The Graduate Mother Scheme is widely held to be a major reason for the sharp drop in the pro-PAP percentage of valid votes from 75.55% at the 1980GE to 62.94% at the 1984GE (Singh, 1992, pp. 16, 94-5 and Figure 2, p. 5). Cherian George (2000, p. 94) writes that: “there is no denying the significance of the 13-point crash that occurred in 1984.”

Dr. Leong, as at the date of our interview in March 2010, perceived himself to be a committed opposition supporter who was attracted to the ideas and the political demonstrations of the SDP. He then lived in Potong Pasir SMC which the SPP's Chiam held from 1984 until 2011; and this fact probably also contributed to him adopting an opposition perspective on most issues. Dr. Leong attended court on the Monday following our Tuesday (March 2, 2010) interview for illegal assembly protest in front of Parliament House with a group of SDP people. Dr. Leong was very supportive of the younger generation of Facebook internet activists then associated mostly with the SDP Youth. Dr. Leong admitted to not having had much personal contact with this young group, because of the "generation gap", but he admired them from afar.

Dr. Leong suggested that younger voters were responsible for marginally increasing Chiam's share of the vote in Potong Pasir SMC at the 2006GE (up from 52.43% to 55.82%). This is the same GE that the WP's book *Days of being Wild* called Singapore's first "internet election" (Lam, 2006, p. 24). Dr. Leong cited the one percentage-point increase in votes won by Chiam at the 2006GE (in actual fact it was 3.39 percentage-points). He claims that this increase, while small, was important because it reflected "younger ones coming of age" in an electorate which actually lost registered voters between 2001 (16,616) and 2006 (15,888). Dr. Leong remarked that the younger generation has no memory of 1963's *Operation Cold Store* or the detention of left-wing radicals without trial for years that resulted from it. (*Operation Cold Store* took place on the night of February 2, 1963 (Visscher, 2007, p. 152). It led to 115 arrests (*ibid.*) of trade-unionists and other left-wing politicians and radicals.) As a result the younger voters of today do not live in the same fear of the PAP government as do their seniors, argued Dr. Leong.

Regarding the 2011GE, Dr. Leong expressed his hope that the combined opposition could win *ten seats*, i.e. two GRCs, presumably in addition to the two SMCs it already held, making a total of 12 MPs. The opposition fell short by one GRC and one SMC.

2006 General Election (based primarily on Eric Tan interview, March 3, 2010)

Mr. Eric Tan stood for the WP in East Coast GRC at the 2006 and 2011GEs and served for a number of years as WP's Treasurer. Mr. Tan was previously, and at the date of our interview, a member of WP's Central Executive Council (CEC). He resigned the party, to the complete shock of informed commentators, shortly after the (May 7) 2011GE because his party chose not to award him the NCMP position in parliament (for "best losing effort"). Although he led the best performing opposition losing team, the party opted for renewal by selecting the much younger Mr. Gerald Giam Yean Song, who at the time was aged 34. Mr. Tan's departure was a major loss for the WP because he was a calm seasoned campaigner and one of the few older people who had contested for the WP at both the 2006 and 2011GEs. Furthermore, his banking industry experience had given him the technical skills and expertise necessary to function effectively as a finance minister in government / shadow finance minister in opposition. Despite being such a serious loss for the WP, his departure went largely unacknowledged and was basically shrugged off by the party.

Mr. Tan graduated from the elite National University of Singapore (NUS); completed compulsory National Service; and worked with the Defence Ministry (MINDEF). At this point he was still regarded as an "Establishment figure" and he viewed himself in the same light

(source: interview with Eric Tan, March 3, 2010). At MINDEF, Mr. Tan said that he first became aware of the elitist meritocracy run by the PAP government (Barr, 2009; Barr & Skrbis, 2008) and became increasingly disillusioned with the ruling party.

Mr. Tan expressed his unhappiness about the government's harsh treatment of opposition politicians and alleged dissidents especially in relation to JBJ and the so-called *Operation Spectrum* aka the "Marxist conspiracy" of 1987-88. *Operation Spectrum* involved the arrest and detention without trial of 22 mostly Roman Catholic social workers and activists on the pretence that they were secret communists engaged in "communist united front tactics" with the aim of violently overthrowing the Singapore government. (Four Singapore Catholic priests were also forced to resign after being identified as subversives.) Mr. Tan was also unhappy about the cost-of-living pressures that became more and more acute and damaging during the "Goh Chok Tong years" (i.e. during the years of the prime-ministership of Goh Chok Tong, 1990-2004). The NSP's Goh Meng Seng agreed (personal interview, October 15, 2010), claiming that Goh Chok Tong's gentle manner, as compared to LKY's abruptness, in fact meant swallowing a "sweet pill" as the government used more and more tricky hyper-capitalist methods such as Certificate of Entitlement (COE); Goods and Services Tax (GST); and Area Licensing Scheme (ALS) (now replaced by Electronic Road Pricing (ERP)) to engineer society and extract increased rents from the working-class.^{vii}

In sharp contrast to the SDP, which went into a period of relative decline after losing its three seats in 1997, the WP, after contesting only a few seats in the 1990s, raised its profile considerably at the 2006GE by contesting many seats and polling consistently well (without adding to its one elected seat). At the 2006GE, WP contested the following seven constituencies: Ang Mo Kio GRC, Aljunied GRC, East Coast GRC, Nee Soon East SMC, Nee Soon Central SMC, Joo Chiat SMC, and Hougang SMC; up from contesting only two SMCs in 2001. The WP wisely decided in 2006 and afterwards to focus its attention on contesting seats in the north-eastern part of the island, a region which fast emerged as its "natural constituency" or its "heartland" (source: interview with Yaw Shin Leong, October 5, 2011).

The period 2006-13 was important in opposition history because it was the period when the WP became the first ever opposition party to gain a significant brand-factor meaning that the WP-brand backing *in itself* was able to make a significant (positive) difference in terms of the votes polled. The SDP had begun this trend, albeit on a smaller and less reliable scale, at the 1991GE when it won three seats (only to lose them all at the 1997GE when Chiam defected to the SPP and the others lost at the ballot box).

Mr. Tan described the 2006 campaign at East Coast GRC for WP as follows:

In 2006 everyone had low expectations of the opposition given all the mess. WP could capture imagination; twenty candidates, well scrubbed, like PAP people. I contested East Coast GRC 2006. I left banking two and a half years ago. Employers are not comfortable if you join in opposition politics. ... In 2006 WP rose from the ashes. I worked hard to get elected, like it was a full-time job. The GRC campaign centred around [*sic*] James Gomez. He said he submitted his [minority certification] form, the Elections Department could not find it; CCTV said he put them in an envelope [instead of submitting it]. They said he had evil intent. PAP could not prove; he said it was an honest mistake; this brought fear factor back. 2001 [actually 1991] they went after Jufrie [Mahmood]; they said he is trying to stir up racial feelings. In '06 they picked on James.

Mr. Tan stressed that the WP's leadership consciously chose to exercise restraint after being criticised by PAP over the "James Gomez affair" where the WP's Gomez was accused of being deceitful by claiming that he had submitted his minority race certificate to the Elections Department when there was no official record of its receipt. WP's restrained approach was important so as to give PAP politicians and MSM journalists no further quotes to use as ammunition. The degree of restraint shown by WP's leadership clearly impressed many people, and it is one major factor explaining WP's electoral success in 2006 as well as the high regard in which the public held the party up until at least around 2013. Despite this, Gomez (personal interview, January 10, 2011) stated that, if he had been in WP's leadership, he would have handled the affair differently. Basically, the PAP's attempt to gain political mileage from the "Gomez affair" rebounded on itself. Patrick Lee told one PAP MP that its harsh politicisation of the Gomez affair was, in his opinion, the primary reason why WP had polled over 40% of the vote in Aljunied GRC (source: personal interview, October 12, 2010).

The WP gallantly took on the PAP team in Ang Mo Kio GRC in 2006, a contest that looked unwinnable because of PM Lee Hsien Loong's presence heading the Ang Mo Kio PAP team. Because WP had chosen to contest the PM's GRC, the media coined the label "Suicide Squad" (敢死队) to refer to the young six-member WP team. However, contesting Ang Mo Kio made sound strategic sense because it is an area with a large ethnic Chinese population (that is far above the national average) and it geographically borders the Hougang SMC already held by the WP. It also includes part of the former Cheng San GRC contested by the WP team that included JBJ and Tang Liang Hong at the 1997GE, a team which performed extremely creditably ending up with 45.18% of the vote (da Cunha, 1997, p. 131). Although the MSM happily reported the swing towards PM Lee in Ang Mo Kio at the 2011GE (L. Lee, 2011), insufficient attention was paid to the fact that Lee contested against a strong WP team in 2006 but against a relatively weak and unpopular Reform Party (RP) team in 2011. The media in 2006 also referred to the WP's "A-Team" (Aljunied GRC including lawyer Sylvia Lim and researcher Gomez) and "B-Team" (East Coast GRC) although Mr. Tan prefers not to put one team above the other.

At the 2006GE, the WP polled very well in a number of seats including 33.9% against PM Lee's team in Ang Mo Kio GRC (L. Lee, 2011). Significantly, Low's share of the vote increased more than marginally in Hougang SMC from 54.98% to 62.74%. Overall, WP's performances at the 2006 GE were as follows: Aljunied GRC 43.91%, Ang Mo Kio GRC 33.86%, East Coast GRC 36.14%, Nee Soon East SMC 31.28%, Nee Soon Central SMC 34.63%, Joo Chiat SMC 34.99%, and Hougang SMC 62.74%. The sheer consistency of these results (by the standards of the day) reflected very well on the resurgent WP and showed that the party had built itself a hardcore supporter base of around 30-35% (rather than the historic 20% of "donkey" hardcore opposition voters referred to by Dr. Leong). The WP was able to build upon these results at the 2011GE, with the party attracting both more committed hardcore support and more swinging voter support.

Mr. Tan presented WP as a party interested in focusing on bread-and-butter issues with little desire to broadcast its belief in so-called "abstract" concepts such as democracy and human rights. This is where WP's approach (in the era of Low Thia Khiang as Secretary-General) differed significantly from that of SDP under Dr. Chee. NGO activist Roderick Chia

(personal interview, March 4, 2010), who assisted the WP team in Aljunied GRC at the 2006GE, put forward to the researcher a similar dichotomy. Although SDP's Chee has covered in detail in his various books specific practical policy recommendations (further refined, as far as economic policy goes, in the 2010 SDP document *It's about you: Prosperity and Progress for every Singaporean*), most or even all of these appeared to follow, more or less directly, from his personal humanitarian liberal-democratic beliefs. Although this may have begun to change, since around the time of the 2011GE, key commentators of the era perceived that the SDP then saw itself in the somewhat Gandhian or Mandelian terms of “light in the darkness” or “voice in the wilderness” (to quote Mr. Tan). Whilst the Gandhianism and Mandelaism might have inspired many SDP members and supporters, Mr. Tan argued that it did not resonate with a socially and politically conservative Singapore electorate. News reports of SDP's strategic civil disobedience were especially badly received by this large segment of the voting population which might have otherwise been sympathetic to the opposition cause. Although Roderick Chia agreed with Mr. Tan's argument generally, he was, and no doubt still is today, “very critical of this ‘reality’ that [Singapore] society imposes on us” (source: personal e-mail communication to the author, March 16, 2011). He went on to add that: “I believe in the SDP's vision, really; it's just that I don't see it coming to fruition anytime soon” (source: *ibid.*). Regarding WP and SDP ideology and practices, Mr. Tan commented as follows:

Part of WP ideology is we don't speak badly about other opposition parties or PAP in public. We feel we are on same side of the fence [to other opposition parties] but we don't need to support them. They [SDP] are different branding. SDP style is engagement; pressure groups; protests outside the parliamentary system as they feel parliamentary system is unfair. This approach does not go [down well] with Singaporeans; they are not politicised; tell them you can do something with your votes; they don't know their political rights. CSJ [Dr. Chee] uses Hong Kong style, put pressure, [and] get what you want. People are not ready for it. SDP brought down opposition cause, people are influenced by SDP actions [to think] that opposition is dangerous [or a] bull in a china shop. I have a right to say I want to differentiate the branding.

In this interview response (cited above) Mr. Tan indicated that he was careful and cautious about SDP. He did not believe that SDP's approach is suitable for Singapore due to voters not being politically experienced or mature. The WP's ideological rejection of “Mandelaism”, a word introduced to us by Mr. Tan, was probably the most important *philosophical* difference between SDP and WP during the years of WP's rise, 2006-13. Mandelaism implies a liberal universalism (Heywood, 2014, pp. 189, 312, 323) where human rights are seen as ultimate truths which must transcend national boundaries (Heywood, 2014, pp. 71, 315) and which are more important than cultural practices and beliefs. Human rights are nothing less than a demand of all humanity *on* all humanity (Akpan, 2018; Luban, 1985). Mr. Tan's views do not perfectly correspond with the “Asian values” (Heywood, 2014, pp. 201-2, 324-5) rhetoric of LKY and Malaysia's Dr. Mahathir in that the WP of Low and Tan was operating within the context of a history of support from the Chinese-educated working-class left-wing which, in the 1950s and 1960s, was sympathetic to Communist China more for reasons of nationalism and Chinese empowerment than Marxist-Leninist Communism; trade-unionism within capitalism was the preferred society for most of this Singapore-based Chinese-educated demographic (Chung, 2018). By contrast, the PAP's leaders saw themselves as Confucian gentlemen, acting in the overall interests of a hierarchical society, with their primary goals being social cohesion and

social reproduction rather than challenging the status and wealth of the elite; ultimately the PAP has served the desires of capitalists for capital accumulation above all else.

Mr. Tan (personal interview, March 3, 2010) pointed out that WP usually gets a strong result in the polls because it is seen as the last remaining living link to the 1960s' Chinese-educated left-wing and because its member JBJ was the first opposition member in the house after PAP regained total control of parliament in 1968 (The late JBJ won the Anson seat at a 1981 by-election on a WP ticket and retained the seat at the 1984GE.) Mr. Tan was realistic and circumspect when we talked in March 2010. He hoped for *ten seats* (two GRCs) to be won for the first time in GE2011 by WP, bringing the number of opposition MPs to 12 (or 11 if either Potong Pasir or Hougang fell to PAP). Mr. Tan's prediction was only one five-person GRC too optimistic with Potong Pasir SMC being, of course, an opposition loss.

To present an SDP view on some of the points mentioned by Mr. Tan, John L. Tan of SDP (Assistant Secretary-General) said that Mr. Chiam asked penetrating and tough questions in Parliament until he observed the persecution of JBJ; after that time his questions became less rigorous and challenging, and he began to focus on just retaining his seat. Tan said: "He threw up some tokens but he was never in serious debate." Evidence of Chiam's co-optation by the Establishment could be seen in the fact that he invited more PAP MPs than opposition members to the wedding of his daughter (source: interview, September 22, 2009). Tan claimed that WP's Low had been "co-opted" by the system. He views Chiam and Low as the "approved" opposition because they are non-confrontational. He said that Low claimed that PAP was worthy of a passing grade, and that, "coming from the opposition, that [statement] is kind of weird". He noted that: "Low has come to the place where he says the two nice things about PAP but not the three negative things." Tan also has said that Low should have demanded that the responsible Minister, Wong Kan Seng, resign as a result of the terrorist, Mas Selamat, being able to escape from Whitley Road Detention Centre.^{viii}

Conclusion

Drawing upon personal interviews, I have presented the opinions of leading Singaporean opposition politicians and activists about developments and issues in Singapore politics covering the period 1996-2013, which I have characterised as a period of stagnation, fall, and rise for the opposition. The two highest profile opposition parties then had very different core beliefs and strategies. The less-confrontational WP was a disciplined and self-controlled political party machine which had a primary goal of winning elections; whereas the SDP operated more like a western or Hong Kong-based NGO with its emphasis upon human rights, freedom of speech, democracy, and strategic civil disobedience within an overall liberal universalism approach; its heroes were Gandhi and Mandela rather than Marx or Mao. My research shows that the Singapore opposition activist community, while small outside of election campaigns during this era (probably numbering no more than fifty), was extremely passionate and determined to taking the city-state away from what its members perceived to be the authoritarian pathway set up by the paternalistic PAP.

The WP's rapid rise from obscurity to become Singapore's second-strongest political force over the 2006-13 period surprised many commentators. Slowly, it has lost ground since then and contributing factors appear to include the loss of the designated successor Mr. Yaw

Shin Leong; the loss of stable old-hand Eric Tan (a banking-industry finance expert); the loss of internet-savvy Goh Meng Seng to National Solidarity Party and later to his own People's Power Party (PPP); the passivity and low-profile of the WP incumbent, Ms. Lee Li Lian, in Punggol East SMC; and other events such as the town council fraud allegations (which are beyond the scope of this article). The WP's ability to secure high vote percentages and even win seats based on brand factor alone (or primarily) was an important new development in Singapore politics over the 1996-2013 period. The SDP's pragmatic tactical shift away from civil disobedience in 2011 was probably a reason why its share of the popular vote increased in Sembawang and Holland-Bukit Timah GRCs at the 2011GE.

As the Lina Chiam case and the Yaw Shin Leong case both indicate, lack of internal regeneration of political parties from within by younger candidates was a major weakness of the opposition of 1996-2013 and remains so today. Instead, opposition parties splinter and major (and not so major) names leave to form new parties, a situation that has led to the somewhat humorous fact that all colors of party polo shirts now appear to have been taken.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The manuscript's sole author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Following the convention in Singapore, for ethnic Chinese people, I write the family name first and then the given names. For example, Wong Wee Nam's family name is Wong.
- ⁱⁱ A Group Representative Constituency (GRC) is a large electoral area where teams of four, five or six opposition candidates compete against the same number of PAP candidates. The GRC system was ostensibly designed to allow for minority ethnic group representation in parliament as each GRC team had to comprise at least one member of Singapore's ethnic minority communities ("Malay" or "Indian" / "Other"). The remaining electorates are smaller SMCs (or Single Member Constituencies). The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee report, released on February 24, 2011, increased the number of SMCs to 12.
- ⁱⁱⁱ On July 21, 1961, all 13 left-wing PAP MPs, a faction led by the trade-unionist Lim Chin Siong, were expelled from the party by a majority vote of the PAP's Central Executive Committee. They then immediately formed the Barisan Sosialis opposition party.
- ^{iv} University researcher Gomez stood for the Workers' Party of Singapore at the 2006GE but switched to the SDP before the 2011GE. His internet presence and activist mentality allows me to place him in the same sentence as See and Zeng.
- ^v Mr. Low handed over the Secretary-Generalship of the WP to Pritam Singh on April 8, 2018. In this article Low is still referred to as the Secretary-General (present tense).
- ^{vi} The firing of Yaw, the designated successor, in 2012 is obviously one reason.
- ^{vii} COE, introduced 1990, is an auction system designed to control car use in crowded city-state Singapore. The former ALS (1975-98) charged a small fixed fee for cars to enter the CBD area during peak hours on weekday mornings (later extended to the full day), and Saturday mornings. It has been replaced by ERP.
- ^{viii} John Tan has paid the price for his involvement in political activities and demonstrations including removal from his job as a psychology lecturer at James Cook University's Singapore campus for what many commentators perceived to be political reasons. He famously wore a T-shirt featuring a kangaroo to communicate his opinion that the Singapore justice system, especially in cases with a political aspect, resembled a kangaroo court.

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